INTERVIEW WITH JOSH ROLNICK

by Eric Wasserman

In 2010 the Guardian *of London published a series on Ten Rules for Writing Fiction. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Richard Ford advised, "Marry somebody you love and who thinks you being a writer's a good idea," and, "Don't have children."*

Josh Rolnick heeded that first recommendation—he refers to his wife as his first, last, and best reader—but the author of Pulp and Paper, *which won the 2011 John Simmons Short Fiction Award, disregarded the second. He works hard to balance a busy family life—he has three sons under seven years old—with his writing, political, and publishing ventures. In a creative-writing culture that is dominated by MFA programs, with attendance at the national AWP conference turning into an annual pilgrimage, and young writers often feeling they have to choose between an individualistic path and the desire to live traditional lives, Rolnick rejects categorization.*

Josh Rolnick

Photo: Nancy Williams

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The characters he puts to the page are continually yearning and reaching for a sense of connection with each other, their former selves, and, more times than not, community. The need to belong to something, somebody, and always someplace is threaded throughout his stories, which have won the Arts & Letters *Fiction Prize and the* Florida Review *Editor's Choice Prize. Rolnick's collection contains four stories set in New Jersey, where he grew up, and four in New York, where he spent his summers as a kid. And while he holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, when asked about his background he'll probably just say he grew up in the Garden State. He now divides his time between New York City and Akron, Ohio. Rolnick is the first to admit to the constant tension all writers face over their allegiance to the worlds they create and the demands of the one they live in. He speaks openly about the tension between writing and family life. This honesty is echoed in his stories, where he takes his characters—and readers—to uncomfortable places, confronting them with the world as it is and not always as they would like it to be.*

A former reporter who now serves as a fiction editor for the journal Unstuck *and publisher of* Sh'ma, *a journal of Jewish ideas, Rolnick has arrived with his debut collection on his own terms.*

The recent cover of Poets & Writers *had the caption "MFA Nation." Lately there seems to be some divisions taking place in American creative-writing circles. MFA vs. NYC, academics vs. working writers, etc. Does this bother you, or do you see some positive aspects to various camps emerging?*

I think it's far too fluid to say it's "academics vs. working writers." That's an oversimplification. There are academics who are also working writers. There are working writers, like me, who are not academics. The writing universe is big enough to accommodate both. There have always been divisions in creative-writing circles, and there always will be.

While attending the Iowa Writers' Workshop, you taught as part of your assistantship, but after receiving your degree, you didn't pursue an academic career as so many MFA graduates seem to these days, and instead gravitated toward building a family and embracing unique editorial endeavors such as becoming publisher of Sh'ma, *and evaluating fiction for* Unstuck. *Do you feel you beat the system in a way, or was this just your natural path?*

Oh, man, I absolutely do not feel like I beat the system! That sort of implies that becoming a teacher is to lose or to somehow be co-opted by the system. I just see mine as a different path. I started out as a reporter, then became an editor. I was an editor when I started writing fiction. For me, publishing *Sh'ma* is perfect, because it allows me to use a very different part of my brain. When I'm writing fiction, I'm concerned with telling a story, creating, following characters wherever they take me. When I'm working on *Sh'ma*, I'm concerned with publishing strategy, budgets, personnel issues. I'm out in the world, dealing with fulfillment and printing presses, editors and advisory board members. In some ways, this gives me the same kind of an outlet that teaching provides other writers. I have immense respect for writers who teach. My very best mentors—Harvey Grossinger and Mark Farrington at Johns Hopkins, Ethan Canin at Iowa—are in that category. At times, I even envy them because they are in and of the writing world, even when they are not writing themselves.

Strong writing communities are created outside academia, but is there ever a part of you that misses how readily available creative support is found in the confines of an academic environment?

Yes. And I sometimes flirt with the idea of going back to teaching, in some capacity, for just that reason.

You recently guest-posted for The Millions*, and related a humorous experience about how you had been working on your short-story collection for some time, and when a literary agent asked you if you were writing a novel, you created a fictitious outline on the spot, and that agent immediately wanted to see the manuscript. What did you take away from this encounter, and do you see it as indicative of the contemporary publishing world? Is the industry becoming too daunting for young writers to navigate?*

That was really a story about how the market, at least right now, is gun-shy about short-story collections. My sense is there was a time when big publishing houses would invest in an author with a debut short-story collection, for the promise of a novel down the road. I really feel like, given the uncertainties in publishing today, with the rise of e-readers, the decline of Borders, etc., risk aversion rules the day. While it's true that short-story collections don't generally sell as well as first novels, it's also true that collections can get rave reviews, win important awards, and bring stature to both an author and a publisher. They can launch careers on their own merits. Some of them even sell a few copies. Wells Tower, Elizabeth Strout, and Jhumpa Lahiri all come to mind. So, I think the aversion to short-story collections has more to do with fear of bucking conventional wisdom than with collections themselves.

Writing is tough. It's always been daunting to navigate the publishing industry. I just reread a *Harper's* article by Richard Ford about his experience trying to sell stories coming out of Cal-Irvine in the 1970s. It was utterly crushing. He was overwhelmed by rejection. He finally managed to place a story in a New Zealand literary journal, and was so overwhelmed with gratitude, he briefly considered moving there. Eventually, he couldn't take it anymore, and he quit writing stories. He sequestered himself away and began writing a novel—just to avoid constant rejection. It sounds to me like a brutal, humbling experience that he was lucky to emerge from—and that was over thirty years ago.

I often hear young short-story writers saying that they feel dismissed, that they think so many readers and even other writers see novel writing as what big boys and girls do, and that short-story writers are seen as second-class scribblers in a way. Is there an unspoken pressure on short-story writers to tackle a longer narrative? Do you feel that pressure now that Pulp and Paper *has entered the world?*

I do feel a certain pressure to write a novel. But that pressure is partly self-imposed. As it happens, novels have a wider readership. More people read novels than short stories, and I think there are some authentic reasons for this. The people I talk to who read novels but not stories talk about getting to know the characters, wanting to follow them for a period of time. They talk about the reward of committing to something longer, and earning the payoff. I'm going to write a novel not because the publishing industry wants me to, but because my writing tends to unspool in many directions at once, and I'm eager to follow those tangents instead of forcing myself to rein them in. It's a new challenge, one that could potentially interest many new readers. At the end of the day, it's about, as Richard Ford says, "reaching people."

Was the New Jersey/New York structure of Pulp and Paper *always intentional, or did it develop over time? Did it pose any logistical hurdles as far as sequencing the stories for the book?*

When I started writing the stories in *Pulp and Paper,* they were just that: distinct stories. I had one concern: get them right on the page. Make each story as good as it can be. It was only once I got to Iowa—I'd been writing stories for five or six years at that point—that I began to worry about how they fit together as a book.

I can't tell you how frustrating it was, talking to agents at Iowa, trying to explain how the stories cohered stylistically and thematically. Telling people that they all dealt with loss or grief or human wants sounded so vague. I remember at one point reading about an author who linked her collection by having a pet in each story. I don't know if the pets were in the stories organically, or if it was more of a gimmick, but it seemed to work. She sold her book.

I had been working on my stories for over a decade when the structure emerged. I remember exactly when it happened. I was driving up the New Jersey Turnpike, meeting my wife in New York City. We were going to see *Fella* on Broadway. I was approaching the Lincoln Tunnel, thinking about the mosaic tiles, the New York/New Jersey marker in the middle, and it occurred to me: four of the stories in my collection were set in New Jersey, three in New York. But I also had one set in western Pennsylvania. I wondered: Could I move that story into western New York instead and have a collection with a certain symmetry—eight stories, four in New Jersey, and the other four in New York?

At dinner with my wife that night before the show, I wrote the names of the stories on a paper napkin, four under New Jersey, four under New York, and, for the first time, I thought: This is it, I have a structure. Of course, it didn't hurt that my wife, who is my best reader and most trusted critic—she sometimes seems to know me and my work better than I do—thought so too.

I asked myself the question: Is it inauthentic to move one of the stories from western Pennsylvania to western New York for the sake of some elusive structure? My answer was no. Because the story, "Pulp and Paper," was more about Slab, the fictionalized town I created, than it was about western Pennsylvania. It was Slab that I cared about as a writer. And Slab was really a composite of several places: Rustbelt, Farmbelt, Biblebelt. "Pulp and Paper" was not a Pennsylvania story in the way that "Mainlanders" is a New Jersey story, or "Big Lake" is a New York story. So, I moved the story to New York, achieving the symmetry I wanted for the book as a whole. The rest I suppose is history. If you look up the story in the *Harvard Review*, where it was first published, you can read the initial version.

I still have the napkin, by the way, where I first wrote out the structure. Within a year of arriving at it, the book won the John Simmons Short Fiction Award. I keep the napkin in a file cabinet in my office. In some ways, I think that really led to this book breaking through. It makes sense now that these stories are together in one book.

Is there too much emphasis on encouraging young, aspiring writers to study at the graduate level too soon in life? Could this be a downside to the current trend of professionalizing creative writing?

I really don't know. I think some young writers are probably ready right when they come out of college, or shortly thereafter. They've been thinking about writing and literature for a long time. They've been writing for a long time. They are looking for time and space to write, and MFA programs are perfect for that. Writing programs, while intense, can also be a safe place where writers are encouraged to experiment and be themselves.

I remember, when I first arrived in Iowa City, thinking how incredible it was that when you brought your laptop to a coffee shop, nonwriters who saw you there day-after-day didn't question your calling, or think of you as a mooch on somebody else's bank account. They saw you, simply, as a writer. Whether or not you were published. And they likely respected you for it.

In Iowa City, the sidewalks are literally engraved with quotes from the novels, stories, and plays of writers. And not necessarily widely recognizable ones. I just learned when I went back for a reading this summer that Iowa City was recently named a UNESCO City of Literature—it's one of only four in the world, and the only one in the United States. Being in this milieu, in this culture of respect for the arts, can be an inspiring, transformative experience for a young writer. It is certainly rare.

Could it also be argued the other way, that being in that milieu can create a false reality and that it is important to remind oneself that there is a world beyond the arts that is not as supportive of those with the creative impulse?

You're not going to get me to say that artists are *too* respected. Iowa City is an oasis. I haven't found one other place where writing is as respected as it is there. I don't know a single writer who forgets that there is a world beyond the arts. We are reminded every day by the deafening silence that too often greets our work. Our entire business is in creating a false reality.

You had your first child while pursuing an MFA. You came to the formal study of creative writing later than some. Was this a strength or a weakness?

For me, a strength. I wasn't ready to write stories when I graduated from Rutgers. It wasn't that I hadn't lived enough. I forget who said it, but I believe it's true that if we've survived childhood, we have enough material to write about for the rest of our lives. But to be a successful writer, you have to really want it. And I mean *really* want it. And I didn't know that I wanted it that much until I spent ten years as a journalist, reporter, and editor. All that time writing about true things never got me any closer to the truth. So I quit my job and enrolled in the Johns Hopkins part-time writing program in Washington, DC. I found a new job and started writing fiction.

The fact that I was older when I got to Iowa was extremely important for me. The Iowa Writers' Workshop is an absolutely incredible place, but it's very intense, and it can be intimidating. It feels like there's a Pulitzer Prize winner around every corner. The fact that I had been sending out stories for some time when I got there along with the fact that I had my first son there and was focused on being a good husband and father helped me keep the MFA experience in perspective. At least I'd like to think so.

Some writers can do it right out of college. But if I'd gone to Iowa straight out of undergrad, I would have been hamburger meat.

You say writing about true things never brought you as close as you wanted to get to the truth. One could argue that Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" is an *absolutely truthful tale from the writer's emotional vantage point. Are there certain stories in* Pulp and Paper *that are very much emotionally autobiographical and nail down the truth in ways for you? Is there one that stands out the most?*

If there are truths that emerge from this collection, I hope they are these: There are no easy answers; we can't tie our problems up neatly in a bow. And yet—this is also a Jewish sensibility—we have to move forward, gropingly, haltingly, beyond loss, heartbreak, and grief. The Ethan Canin epigraph for the book sums it up: "That's another thing this story is about, I suppose: how there's no going back."

The story "The Herald" may be the most autobiographical in the collection. I worked at a newspaper in Central Jersey much like the one the main character, Dale Tapper, works at. And, like Dale, I really screwed up a big story when I worked there. The details are different. Dale is a grizzled news veteran who feels the newsroom passing him by. He sees younger, more aggressive reporters coming up around him, setting a new standard. He wants to break a story about a missing mom, in part to prove to himself that he still *can* break a story.

I was one of those aggressive young reporters. And when I was just starting out my career at the *New Tribune* in Woodbridge, New Jersey, which is now the *Home News Tribune*, I covered what was really the story of a lifetime. I'd actually left the newsroom for the evening when it happened—it was after deadline—and when I got home twenty minutes later, my phone was ringing. It was my editor: "Look out the window," he said. And there was this ungodly plume of fire that went straight to the sky. I lived about ten miles away, but I'm sure you could have seen it from outer space. I thought a plane had crashed. But even that didn't really make sense.

I got into my car, drove as fast as I could to the scene. Parked as close as I could get and ran toward the column of fire, against a stream of people running—some of them barefoot—the other way. I remember, it was like this erie flickering daytime. You could feel the heat on your face blocks away. I was going on pure adrenaline. It turns out a natural gas pipeline had exploded, taking out a sprawling housing complex in a matter of minutes.

Anyway, over the ensuing days and weeks, the pressure to uncover how it happened—and who was responsible—was immense. One day, I got wind that a business had secured a permit to dig near the pipeline before it exploded. I spent all afternoon on a payphone talking to the company president, confirming the details. The story ran lead the next day. A huge banner headline across page one.

Only I was wrong. The company *had* secured a permit, but there was no evidence other than circumstantial that they had anything to do with the explosion. They were never linked to it. We had to run a significant correction.

I must've filed dozens of stories on that pipeline disaster. Many of them good, accurate, and I'd like to think well reported. Those stories were important, even reflective. But did they get at the truth of human experience?

The story of that day was the story of the people whose lives were upended in a blink by a preventable disaster. But that wasn't *my* story. It's not the fire that's haunted me over the years, as awful as it was. It was the mistake I made. For me, what's fundamental are the human questions at the heart of Dale's story: How do we make these kinds of mistakes, and at the same time trust our instincts? Why do we push ourselves beyond the point where we know we are on solid ground? How do we handle the shame of public failure? Can we ever really move beyond that kind of humiliation? These are the truths I'm trying to excavate now as a fiction writer that I simply couldn't as a reporter.

I think "The Herald" can be read two different ways. Dale is sympathetic on one level, but he can also be seen as representing a critique of journalism itself, of reporters chasing stories for reasons other than the public good. Was that on your radar during the writing process?

I have immense respect for journalists, particularly those at local newspapers, like the *Herald*, who care about news, care about getting it right, and who make this their life's work—despite low pay, tough hours, and little recognition. "The Herald," to me, is a story about a guy who wants something so badly that he loses sight of what he values most—in this case, accuracy. If anything, I think of this story as an ode to a kind of bygone era of newsgathering—pre-internet, pre-Twitter, pre-media conglomeration—when independent papers like *The Herald* were absolutely central in the life of a community.

I know serious fiction writers who have problems with journalism, that they see a lot of it as sloppy writing. Is there a morsel of truth in that, or is such a stance elitist?

Journalists would probably be lost without fiction writers. Every political or war reporter—heck, every reporter in general—should read Jose Saramago's *Blindness*. And Gabriel García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold.* But fiction writers would be just as lost without journalists. "The Herald" draws heavily and very specifically on Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's *All the President's Men.* By the way, Woodward and Bernstein also famously got one of their most important Watergate stories wrong. Pick up any *New Yorker* article on the Iraq War by George Packer—he's doing something that gets at the heartless truth of war no less than Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried.* "Sloppy" paints with way too broad a brush.

The opening line of the first story in the collection, "Funnyboy," explodes with incredible possibilities for where the piece is going to take the reader. I try to drive home the importance of opening narrative space in stories with my students. As a fiction editor for Unstuck *can you speak to this, especially in terms of reading stories and now being on the other end of the submissions process?*

First sentences are crucial. Mainly, I think, they establish the authorial confidence that is absolutely necessary for successful fiction. If a reader is going to follow you, it's important that they know from the very first line that they can trust the story.

When I'm reading fiction, though, it's not first-line-or-bust. I think sometimes there are very good stories that take some time to find their beat and get going, that are worth giving a chance.

But I haven't answered your question. I love how you put it—about the importance of opening narrative spaces. There's no doubt you're right. You really don't want to start a story with a sentence or paragraph that forecloses possibility—especially in early drafts. To bring it back to your earlier question, "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect-like creature," is much better than "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect-like creature, and then he got squashed."

You were kind enough to share two previous versions of "Funnyboy" with one of my graduate classes prior to the collection's publication, and also allowed the students to compare those versions to the one in the uncorrected proof of the book. You didn't just clean up spelling and grammar, you were completely rethinking your approach to that story with each draft. Was this consistent with the other seven stories, or were there pieces that came more easily to the page?

I have never written a story that has come easily to the page. It takes me years and years to write a good story. It's not rethinking with each new draft, though. It's what Robert Olen Butler talks about. It's *re-dreaming*. It's taking what works, going to the parts that don't work, and writing forward with a blank page and "dream storming." It's doing this over and over again until the story starts to have some recognizable shape, a narrative flow. Until you start to get the characters right. I don't think there's a story in the book that took me less than two years to write. Most took significantly longer.

I read a lot of Northeastern-centric stories, especially those set in New York City, that have little attention to environment detail. "The cab inched down Manhattan's Sixth Avenue" means nothing to a West Coast native like myself. Your stories are rich in environment placement. I'm thinking especially of the opening of the title story. You're from the Northeast, but has living elsewhere forced you to approach a story's environment details in ways that have surprised you over the years?

It's not living in any one particular place. It's simpler than that. I love setting. I often start with it. I remember the first story I ever workshopped at Johns Hopkins. It was a much earlier version of "Mainlanders," which is set in a fictionalized Bay City on the Jersey Shore. During the workshop, one of the other students remarked that she could smell the salt and feel the sand under her feet. This really stuck with me. The story itself—and I'm not exaggerating—was thirteen years away from being finished. But I never gave up on it, in part because of the way readers reacted to the environment I was creating: the bay, the ocean, the beach town block.

It's been the same with many of my other stories. I get the place right long before I get the story right; it's the setting that tells me I should stick with it.

The closing piece of the book, "The Carousel," very much reads to me like a story with a post-9/11 sensibility. Is Rubin, the narrator, symbolic of a world we'll never see again? There is also a dreamlike quality to that piece, and I am curious if it is an approach you intend to further explore, or if it simply felt right for this particular story?

I never thought about it as a post-9/11 story, but I like that reading. Rubin is a character who laments a certain loss of innocence, and that's certainly something I associate with 9/11. The dream-like quality fits with this reading. In a way, I think we are still all hoping that one day we'll wake up and somehow that nightmare will never have happened.

We're ten years past 9/11. Do you think American fiction has been altered by that horrific event, say in a similar way that fiction on Jewish themes was never the same in the post-Holocaust world?

My guess is the answer is yes. James Hynes's *Next* certainly comes to mind. It's one day in the life of a guy who, at the end of the day, finds himself in a building that suffers much the same fate as the Twin Towers. It's a searing, utterly demolishing book that is as hard to put down as it is to keep reading. If 9/11 never happened, I'm not even sure it would be interesting. It'd be like the movie *Die Hard.* Nobody would understand the point. As it was, as soon as I finished it, I felt compelled to send Hynes an email about it. I couldn't just sit there. I felt angry and absolutely drained. I had to do *something.*

You've been involved in politics in your personal life as a member of the National Jewish Democratic Council's executive committee and other activities. Do you consider "Pulp and Paper" to be a political story?

I have never set out to write a political story. I start with a voice, an image, a scrap of dialogue, I tune my ear to it, and I just go. These stories do not promote a political point of view. That said, it may be true that in some way or another, all stories—not just mine—are political. Literary fiction is the stuff of life, and life is, or should be, the stuff of the public affairs of a country. "Big River" is a story with abortion at the center. The woman wants one; her boyfriend doesn't. Should she have one? Shouldn't she? I don't have a stake in that game *in the* *story*. What I care about is getting their relationship right, and telling their story in a way that makes meaning possible. You could describe yourself as pro-choice, which I am, and be mad at the story. You could describe yourself as pro-life and also be mad at the story. As long as you are mad, I've done my job.

"Pulp and Paper" is definitely political. It's about an industrial train wreck at a pulp-and-paper plant. Pulp and paper is one of the dirtiest industries out there, with all kinds of consequences for the environment. Not the least of which is that it depends upon cutting down trees. But I'm not telling this story to promote an environmental cause. I'm telling it because it's a moment in the life of the main characters, Gale and Avery, which interests me. No—that *rivets* me. It's *the* most important moment of their lives.

I once heard Sherman Alexie say that if he isn't pissing somebody off he isn't doing his job as the writer. Can I take it you also subscribe to that?

That's true sometimes. But I'm going for something else, too. It goes back to what Richard Ford wrote in that *Harper's* essay—the point is to *reach* people. To commit an effect on them. It might be to anger them, but it just as well might be to please them, or get them to stop and think, or—Anne Lamott writes about this in *Bird-by-Bird*—to make them laugh. You want them to recognize themselves, put down the book, and have a catch in their throats. Maybe think about doing something a little differently from here on out. That's the point.

"Mainlanders" seems to be the collection's secret weapon, almost a transitional piece. I think a lot of beginning fiction writers are reluctant to approach such young characters and are especially timid to do so in the first person because of the possibility of the piece being assigned the Young Adult label. There's a workmanlike quality about your prose in general, but this story, as well as "Big Lake," feels wonderfully loose in its construction. As the author you seem to really love writing for these particular characters. Is there a certain freedom you see in capturing youthful voices, or does it present a greater responsibility to the writer?

I love the way you see the story as transitional. Not just from New Jersey to New York, but from childhood to adolescence. I did love writing "Mainlanders" and "Big Lake." That's not to say they were easy to write; it took me thirteen years to write "Mainlanders." I guess I'm not so interested in what people will call it. Young Adult. Coming of age. Are there things in the human experience that are off-limits for literary fiction writers? I don't think so. And childhood certainly is wonderful, fertile terrain for any writer.

I take it as a compliment that the construction of these pieces seems "wonderfully loose." That probably makes the stories more fun to read. But that's part of the magic of storytelling. "Mainlanders" was one of my toughest stories to construct. The placement of every single word is intentional. There are scenes I could recite by heart.

Part of the reason it took so long is precisely because I'm writing about kids, but the stories don't represent simply a child's point of view. In both cases, the stories are told by retrospective narrators. These are adults looking back on important moments in their lives as kids. Eventually, the kids' voices take over. But at precise, key moments, the adults come into the narrative to assist the kids in making sense and meaning. In "Mainlanders," the older Nick is able to see the younger Nick through Anna's eyes; he'd never be able to do that in the moment of the story. In "Big Lake," Flip knows that his moment of peace at the end of the story is ephemeral; he *couldn't* know that in the moment, either. Earlier versions of both stories without this lens fell short, precisely because kids don't have the full context or the understanding of these moments the way adults do. And, unfortunately, some adults never do.

Man, I love that: the secret weapon. It may just be. That's the story where I feel the press of my soul on the page.

You were excited when you learned I was teaching a Stephen King novel in a graduate course. If you ask me, he's one of the best when it comes to capturing the way kids are. His wonderful novella, The Body, *comes to mind. After all these years, why do you think King and popular novelists in his company are still routinely dismissed by writers of serious fiction?*

It's the same old saw: King writes horror, and is perceived as a genre writer. I love Stephen King. He was one of the first authors to truly inspire me, and to enliven my creativity. When I finished *It* as a teenager I felt like I was the champion of the world, as if I'd achieved some true greatness. I simply could not keep my bedroom window blinds open for weeks after reading *'Salem's Lot*; I was terrified of what

I might see hovering out there in the darkness. But I don't put King in a coming-of-age box. His short stories in the *New Yorker* continue to floor me. I refer to his book *On Writing* all the time. A few years ago, a Fox Sports reporter found King in the stands of a Boston Red Sox playoff game—he is a diehard fan—and the reporter wanted to interview him. King assented. I don't remember anything he said. What I remember is that King was *reading a book* during the game. If I recall, he was slightly perturbed to be asked to put it down. That impressed me so much. Here he was at a critical moment of a critical playoff game for a beloved team surrounded by distraction and he was *reading*. It would be hard for me to imagine, frankly, someone more serious about fiction and the world of literature.

I tend to rally against the "write what you know" mantra and instead encourage young writers to write about what they know about and are still trying to understand. Is there a particular story or character or even situation in Pulp and Paper *where you found yourself in that position as a writer?*

I like that you rail against "write what you know." We're all writing what we know, all the time, whether it comes from direct experience or not. In my stories, it's a question of trying to understand the characters: what motivates them, what pleases them, what fires their rage. Perhaps the best example of this is "Funnyboy." To write that story, I had to try to understand the psychological profile of a man who's lost his only son. What would he think? How would he act? Why? That's the quest of that particularly story. I hope, by the end, part of the answer is: You can never really understand loss that profound.

As the father of three sons yourself, was it emotionally taxing or psychologically draining to continually have to enter and re-enter that mindset in order to see the story through, or were you able to find some personal detachment as the writer?

The short answer is no.

I was lucky enough to go to the Iowa Writers' Workshop when Frank Conroy was still there. Unfortunately, he died at the start of my second year. One of my greatest regrets is that I did not have a chance to take his workshop. But there are many bits of wisdom that Frank has imparted to students over the years about writing and the writing process that have seeped into my writerly consciousness. There's the "backpack" metaphor—writing a story is like scaling a mountain, and you have to make sure you only put what you need in your backpack. No unnecessary tangents; everything has to have a function in the story. He told students to write six days a week, three hours a day. But the advice I remember most is probably the advice of his that I hear quoted least: Get married, Frank said. Have a couple of kids. I heard that advice around the time my first son was born—I was worried about the impact fatherhood would have on me as a writer, the crimp it might put in my writing time—and the advice, the timing, was the greatest gift. Frank's point was: Don't sequester yourself away. Live your life. Your fiction will ooze forward out of all that clay. My three boys are my greatest joy. This is only truer when I am emotionally taxed or psychologically drained.

Last night, at the dinner table, my six-year-old started to pretend to blow the shofar—the Jewish New Year is coming up and my kids are learning about it again in school. My son was saying what the rabbi says before the ritual sounding of the ram's horn: *Tekiah gadolah!* And then seeing how long he could make the sound, holding his breath, red faced, hand-horn at his mouth. Well, of course, my four-year-old chimed in, doing short staccato bursts. And then, here's what got me, my one-year-old—we didn't even recognize it at first, we just thought he was babbling—*he* starts doing it too, with this sly, I-am-so-proud-of-myself-for-catching-on grin on his face. My wife and I are applauding, and the boys start taking turns. The chicken and rice was all but forgotten. If this doesn't snap you out of your stupor and make you want to write, my friend, nothing will.

One could argue that non-literary influences are just as important to shaping a writer's sensibility as the books they absorb and find kinship with. Were there influences beyond the world of words that left their stamp on Pulp and Paper*?*

Growing up, spending my summers at a beach house on the Jersey Shore. Camping in Buck Pond in Upstate New York. Also, while this is not a book that tackles explicitly Jewish themes, I do believe there are certain Jewish sensibilities underlying it: every life is worth the universe; seeking and granting forgiveness is worthwhile; first do, and then you will understand. It's important to move on after tragedy, but it's also important to always remember. There's a Jewish idea called *Gemilut Chassadim*, which is about the importance of acts of loving kindness. I think several stories in the book, and in particular the title story, illustrate the overwhelming virtue of kindness, even when—especially when—it does not arise from the most charitable impulses.

Do you think you'll be more straightforward in crafting fiction on Jewish themes in the future? Is there a Jewish issue or question you don't see fiction tackling that is in need of being addressed through the imagined lens?

Stay tuned. And, no. Someone somewhere is tackling everything.

I find it humorous when my students assume we writers who have published books don't still experience rejection like everyone else. If you could say one thing to those budding wordsmiths, what would it be?

I would tell them that the most important thing for every writer, the thing you need much more than you need talent, is a thick skin. That, and the discipline to sit in a chair and write. But the ability to withstand rejection may be even more important. There's a reason Richard Bach said, "A professional writer is an amateur who didn't quit."

In 1996 Jonathan Franzen drew a lot of heat for his now infamous Harper's *essay in which he lamented about the state of the modern novel, and despaired over whether serious literary fiction had become irrelevant. You recently posted on your blog some of* Storyville *cofounder and publisher Paul Vidich's thoughts on the state of the modern short story. Are you hopeful, or do you have genuine concerns about the current state of the short story as an art form, as well as its readership?*

I'm hopeful that people like Paul Vidich will help preserve the short story by using technology to find new formats and venues, embracing new ways to get stories in the hands of readers. I don't think the short story will ever go away. There's just nothing else quite like it.

I think maybe the first time I realized this was years ago, when I read Brady Udall's "The Wig." That story can't be more than five hundred words—less than a page. The action is minimal: a boy finds a wig in a dumpster and puts it on his head. But the story is shot through with a grief made more devastating *because* the story is short. It's as if Udall is saying: This is it, this is all there is and all there needs to be, I have nothing more to add. That very brevity says: *Pay attention, now.* And not just to the story. To your life.

Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* is about grief, too. It's one of the most beautiful books I've read in a long time—I guess it's technically a novel-in-stories. But while the novel is moving, it was the experience of the chapters as short stories within it that jolted me. I'm thinking in particular of "Incoming Tide," which ends with one person, who had been contemplating suicide, diving into a rough ocean to save another from drowning, the two of them clinging to each other in furious, lashing waves: "Oh, insane, ludicrous, unknowable world! Look how she wanted to live. Look how she wanted to hold on." I experienced that story within the novel viscerally, a punch to the gut that simultaneously tells me everything that's wrong with the world and also all that's right with it.

You mentioned the recent piece I wrote for *The Millions*. In that essay, I talk about how my sister gave me a gift fourteen years ago—*The Best American Short Stories: 1997*—and the role that edition played in my decision to start writing fiction seriously. In the introduction to that anthology, Annie Proulx writes that short stories have a function "beyond entertainment." She writes, "The reader comes to the short story subliminally expecting enlightenment. That is, we accept the idea that there is some nugget of embedded truth in a short story." That's exactly how it is for me. It's that idea of truth again. A flash of insight *because* the story is over in a flash. And the short story does that in ways nothing else can for me.

In my youth when I wasn't working in bookstores, record stores, and video stores I was digging for treasures in them. We're seeing the demise of those places in our own lifetime. Are books in particular, especially serious literary fiction, going to be like theater has become over the decades; an art form appreciated by a certain sub-culture of society instead of a mainstay of popular expression, social commentary, and entertainment?

I hope not. I have a Kindle. I read online. But I love books. Truly. The way they look, the way they smell, the way they feel in your hand. My hope is that over time, people will recognize the value of that experience, and books will—even if on a smaller scale—persevere.

For those of us who fell in love with books before the information-technology age, I'd like to think that reading was and remains about more than just the words on the page. Sitting for hours with an actual physical book is still a special experience for me. Last year Amazon.com reported more e-book than print sales. Does this bother you, or is it simply the world we now live in, and we should just accept that at least there are people who are still reading fiction?

Look, there is a tremendous upside to e-readers. Beyond the substantial number of trees they save, they promote reading by making it easier, and by making books more readily accessible. But in my perfect world, books—and books as an art form—will always have a role.

Without having to reveal the goods, could you give a hint about your current project? Is there a certain question the story and its characters are struggling with?

I would love to, but it's honestly too early to say just yet. There's a short essay by Dr. Betty S. Flowers called "Madman, Architect, Carpenter, Judge: Roles and the Writing Process" that talks about how different personas come to the fore at different stages in the writing process. I am, right now, in the madman phase. When I finish the book tour I am currently on, I will sit down again and try to continue writing like a madman—wildly, following tangents, reining nothing in. That's a key part of my process. If I'm lucky, in six months I might be able to tell you where I'm headed. But don't count on it.

Finally, if Pulp and Paper *had its own soundtrack, which artist would bring it to song?*

Bruce Springsteen and Billy Joel. I need one for each section.

So, you can self-exile yourself to the Midwest but the Northeast is never going to leave you?

It's like The Boss sings, "In the distance I could see the town where I was born."

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